DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 193 HE 009 779

AUTHOR Cowley, W. H.
TITLE The Seven Liberal Arts Hoax.
PUB DATE [45]
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Arithmetic; Astronomy; *College Role; *Educational History; *Educational Philosophy; *Educational Theories; Geometry; Grammar; *Higher Education; *Liberal Arts; Logic; Music; Rhetoric

ABSTRACT

The so called "seven liberal arts" (grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) basis of some colleges is criticized in this speech. It is noted that the Greeks had no knowledge of the seven liberal arts, which were also unknown to Romans during their era of domination. The liberal arts did not become seven until the fourth century A.D. but the Christian world did not accept the seven liberal arts until the sixth century, The Trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), the two divisions of the seven liberal arts, did not become important designations until the ninth century. It is concluded that universities did not come into existence until the seven liberal arts were superseded, and upon the establishment of universities the seven liberal arts became secondary studies, although often some of them were not taught. (SPG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED152193

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE SEVEN LIBERAL ARTS HOAX

W. H. Cowley

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
W. H. Cowley
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

For a decade now President Robert M. Hutchins of the University of Chicago and his disciples have been blowing trumpets for the seven liberal arts of the Middle Ages and insisting that "the hope of education lies in the chance that it can recover its faith" in them. St. John's College, Maryland, even goes so far as to assert that it is the only bona fide liberal arts college in the United States because it alone builds its curriculum upon the seven liberal arts.

Mark Van Doren in his recent book Liberal Education, expounds the Hutchins-St. John's creed and explains that "the liberal arts are seven" because of "tradition grounded in more than two milleniums of intellectual history." Historically, however, neither statement is true: the liberal arts did not become seven until the ancient world had passed into limbo, and the vaunted "two milleniums of intellectual history" is more than a double exaggeration: the seven liberal arts controlled education for only eight hundred years -- from the fourth to the twelfth century, that is, during the Dark Ages. So much current educational discussion stems from this erroneous history that it needs to be exposed. Here are the facts:

First: The Greeks had no knowledge of the seven liberal arts. Neither Plato nor Aristotle had any conception of them, and no other Greek thinker recognized their existence. Plato in The Republic described at length the education of the leaders or "guardians" of his ideal state, but his program bears little resemblance to the seven liberal arts. He organized

HE009729

his ideal educational program around two primary activities (not studies), and these should, he proposed, dominate education until youths' twentieth year. These two basic educational activities were music and gymnastics. The first of these the exponents of the seven liberal arts included in their lists, but not in Plato's sense. By music he meant rhythm in prose, poetry, song, and even in the plastic arts; but this conception of music had died long before the list of seven liberal arts became established. Gymnastics (including dancing) also disappeared from education during this same seven-century period.

Plato included in his program of studies four of the later "liberal arts" (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), and because of this, it has frequently been alleged that he was the originator of the debated seven, but this is a naive indefensible view. Nowhere did he propose grammar, logic, or rhetoric as necessary or even desirable studies. These three, however, were the primary subjects of the seven liberal arts. Moreover, he put constant and major emphasis upon philosophy which he judged to be the supreme topic and end of education and also of life. His guardians devoted five years (from 30 to 35) to this most prized of all studies, and during this time they studied nothing else. Philosophy, however, is not one of the seven liberal arts. It had waned before their invention; and when the universities revived it later, they had to push the controversial "seven" into a subordinate place.

Aristotle was as ignorant as Plato of the seven liberal arts. He produced only one list of studies: a curriculum for children which included four subjects -- reading, gymnastics, music, and painting. On the elementary

level, which is the only level he discusses systematically, Aristotle's ideas (and also Plato's) were more akin to those of present-day progressive educators than to the Hutchins-Van Doren-St. John's propagandists.

Second: The seven liberal arts were also unknown to the Romans during their era of domination. Had the Greeks known about the seven liberal arts, the Romans would have promptly adopted them; but since they were not yet in existence, Roman statesmen and educators made their own lists of studies which were as varied in number and content as were those of the Greeks. In the first century B.C. Varro listed nine studies and Vitruvius eleven. A few decades later, Seneca listed five. These curriculums included some Greek subjects, excluded others, and added several (such as architecture, drawing, history, law, literature, medicine, and philosophy) which were not made part of the compendium of studies later to become known as the seven liberal arts.

During this same period Cicero particularly accented history, jurisprudence, and philosophy; but a century and a half later Quintilian passed over all three and put his emphasis upon only four subjects -- grammar, music, geometry, and arithmetic. Cicero considered these to be secondary studies, but Quintilian made them the sole content of both lower and higher education. His limited educational ideals prepared the way for the restricted and restricting seven liberal arts, but he knew nothing about them as such. That curriculum, the idol of the Middle Ages, had not as yet been formulated.

Third: The liberal arts did not become seven until the fourth centry A.D. Quintilian, the rhetorician and schoolmaster, narrowed down the lofty

educational conceptions of Cicero, the statesman and philosopher. Full of wordiness and pedantry, his type of education met the needs of dictator-dominated Rome, and rapidly it became the established system of the Graeco-Roman world. Inevitably, time changed the Quintilian formula, and by the fourth century his curriculum evolved into the seven liberal arts. In this century the term was employed for the first time.

It acquired currency and then immense prestige because of an educational treatise, the Satyricon, written by Martianus Capella, the leading Roman scholar of the period. Capella organized his work on the model of Varro's book on education written some four hundred years earlier. Varro and Cicero were contemporaries, but Varro was the more important scholar. He wrote 74 major literary works; and Cicero, Quintilian, and St. Augustine honored him with such titles as "the parent of Roman erudition," "the greatest of Roman scholars," and "the most diligent investigator of antiquity." His prestige continued high for many centuries, and it was natural for Capella to use him as the chief source of his Satyricon.

But Varro listed nine liberal arts and not seven. Capella dropped architecture and medicine which Varro had included. Why? The reason seems to be that Capella, although a pagan, was a neo-Platonist, and as such he had more interest in the next life than in this. He therefore wrote a course of study which in his judgment would fit students for the life hereafter. Angels of course were never sick and needed no medicine; therefore he dropped medicine. Angels needed no houses in which to live, and so he dropped architecture.

Moreover, he believed the number seven to have great magical powers, and so he felt compelled to have a list of seven liberal arts, no more, no less. In both the ancient and medieval worlds almost everyone venerated this extremely potent number, and so Capella's catalogue of seven liberal arts easily took hold. His book has been called "the most successful textbook ever written," and it became the chief educational staple of the Middle Ages.

Anything built around the magical digit seven had a huge advantage as witness its widespread use: the seven wisemen of Greece, the seven wonders of the world, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven holy founders, the seven candles in the sacramental candelabra, the seven cardinal virtures, the seven deadly sins, and so forth. The medieval world was riddled with many kinds of superstition, and numerological magic had an especially strong hold on everyone from serfs to scholars, from bakers to bishops. Capella's seven liberal arts gained currency largely because of the powerful sway of numerology.

Fourth: <u>The Christian world did not accept the seven liberal arts until the sixth century</u>. During Capella's day in the fourth century, the seven liberal arts were firmly fixed as the curriculum of pagan schools, but Christian leaders fought both the schools and their curriculum. Opposition began to dissipate when St. Augustine in the fourth century honored pagan learning and the liberal arts; but antagonism did not entirely disappear until the sixth century. Augustine was also enamoured of the magic of numbers, but his favorite number was six. It is often asserted that he "accredited" the seven liberal arts, but this is erroneous history. He

honored the liberal arts, but he never referred to them as seven. The probabilities are that he never even heard of the term "the seven liberal arts."

Augustine's influence in opening up the way for the acceptance of pagan educational ideas was immense, but credit for establishing the liberal arts as seven in the Christian world belongs to Cassiodorus who wrote on education one hundred and fifty years after Augustine. Cassiodorus, a scholar, an important Roman statesman, and also a Christian, founded two important monasteries and wrote about education to promote the training of monks. In his book, Institutiones, he gave a succinct account of the seven liberal arts and defended their number by quoting such passages from Scripture as Proverbs 9:1: "Wisdom builded her house; she has hewn out seven pillars."

Cassiodorus was the first Christian to use the term, and it was essentially because of him that Christians accepted it and what it represented. He did not mention Capella in his treatise, but his approval and promotion of the seven liberal arts gave the Satyricon of his pagan predecessor a tremendous boost and made it the basic textbook of the monasteries and therefore of the Middle Ages. From the sixth to the twelfth centuries Capella's educational program, as made acceptable by Cassiodorus, controlled European education, and the seven liberal arts were firmly established.

Fifth: The Trivium and Quadrivium, the two divisions of the seven liberal arts, did not become important designations until the ninth century. After the establishment of the educational program of Capella and Cassiodorus,

educators broke up the seven liberal arts into two parts: grammar, rhetoric, and logic were considered to be preparatory studies and labeled the Trivium; the other four -- arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music -- were judged to be advanced, and they became known as the Quadrivium. These two designations appear in the writings of Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville, but they gained wide currency chiefly through the work of Alcuin, the English scholar who acted as educational adviser to Charlemagne. The large educational and social reforms of that enlightened despot changed the direction of medieval thought and gave Alcuin's educational ideas and nomenclature effective circulation. Thus the terms Trivium and Quadrivium attained permanent status.

But Alcuin did little to improve them. They continued to be narrow, poverty-stricken subjects of study. In the following passage, Rashdall describes both varieties of educational diet:

> In the Dark Ages arithmetic and astronomy found their way into the educational curriculum chiefly because they taught the means of finding Easter. Music included but a half-mystical doctrine of numbers and the rules of plainsong . . . . Historically speaking, the Quadrivium is chiefly important as supplying the skeleton outline of a wider course of study which was afterwards filled up by the discoveries and rediscoveries of the twelfth-century Renaissance. The real secular education of the Dark Ages was the Trivium -- grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic.

Sixth: Universities did not come into existence until the seven liberal arts were superseded. Charles Homer Haskins of Harvard, the leading American authority on medieval universities, made this point in his book The Rise of Universities, published in 1923. "So long as knowledge," he wrote, "was limited to the seven liberal arts of the early Middle Ages,

there could be no universities, for there was nothing to teach beyond the bare elements of grammar, rhetoric, logic, and the still barer notions of arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music, which did duty for an academic curriculum."

Universities were first established under the impact of the revival of knowledge from the ancient world and of the new knowledge of mathematics and medicine coming into Europe from Arabian sources. These were the forces which stirred the minds of Europeans to organize the new seats of learning called universities. The seven liberal arts were static studies of a world fast becoming outmoded.

Seventh: Upon the establishment of universities the seven liberal arts became secondary studies, and often some of them were not taught. In the face of present-day proposals that the seven liberal arts be given pre-eminence in higher education, the historical fact must be emphasized that the medieval universities immediately bypassed them for what were known as the Three Philosophies and that they became preparatory to these advanced studies. The Three Philosophies took precedence in the universities because of the rediscovery of the lost writings of Aristotle during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They were thought of as a group, but they were taught separately as Natural Philosophy, Moral Philosophy, and Metaphysical or Mental Philosophy. The seven liberal arts continued to be taught, but everyone recognized them as inferior to the Three Philosophies.

When Greek came into the university curriculum for the first time (in the late fourteenth century in Italy and the early sixteenth in England), the

liberal arts receded to even lesser importance. They were given lip service for centuries, some of them were not even taught. For example, the statutes imposed upon the University of Paris in 1366 (by the two cardinals who were sent there by the Pope to reform it) passed over five of them and required only grammar and logic plus psychology (i.e., Mental Philosophy) for the Bachelor of Arts degree. None of the seven was required for the Master of Arts degree. Those who sought that higher academic label studied the Three Philosophies.

It becomes clear from this review that the seven liberal arts flourished not for two thousand years as alleged, but for only eight hundred: from the fourth to the twelfth centuries, that is, during one of the most retarded periods of history. The assertion that "the liberal arts are seven" because of "tradition grounded in more than two milleniums of intellectual history" is a numerological hoax being perpetuated by men whose knowledge of the historical facts is too sketchy to be taken seriously.

Hutchins, Van Doren, et al are in effect urging the colleges to return to a course of study which higher education subordinated some 800 years ago. They are therefore reactionary with a vengence: reactionary to the pre-university era. If we should follow their advice, we should be returning, not -- as they assert -- to the curriculum of the medieval universities (which in itself would be senseless), but to the educational regimen of the Dark Ages.